

Mars Hill students, faculty join residents to mourn 10 campus trees ahead of removal

Johnny Casey Asheville Citizen Times

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To celebrate the Grandmother Oak and the other trees, as well as to mourn their impending loss amid the administration's plans to chop them down, more than 40 residents, including Mars Hill University students and faculty, joined March 24 to sing songs, recite poems and offer a proper tribute to the natural architecture.

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Mars Hill President Tony Floyd announced the campus construction plans in a Feb. 29 video, in which he detailed the Together We Rise fundraising efforts to be appropriated to its new campus center. Floyd and the administration said the construction will cost roughly \$28 million, to include the campus center, which will feature student activity space, a student fitness center, gaming, dining area and a welcoming space for the university's admissions office, Cothran Center for Career Readiness, chaplain's office, student life and student organizations.

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"I grew up playing on these trees," Boggess said. "My parents worked here, so on snow days we would come and play. I remember we would go and make mud soup and put the acorns in like spring onion."

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Administration's response

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"When I first heard about it, I was devastated. It's really saddening, to me, to hear that it wasn't super well known to students, and that some people thought it wasn't important to the students," she told The Citizen Times. "So, Laura encouraged me to write an email to President Tony Floyd, and I did. He got back to me, and it was really sweet, because he thanked me for my email and he told me how Laura and Gilly had contacted him, and how he'd been in meetings about the trees.

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In collaboration with Boggess and other faculty, Floyd said the administration now plans to maintain two of the original 12 trees that were scheduled for removal.

In an email to The Citizen Times, Floyd said the decision to remove the trees is one that has saddened him, also.

"I also feel sad that we had to bring down trees, especially older ones that witnessed many days and memories for people," Floyd said. "We extensively considered other locations and layouts, other ways to accomplish the project, but this was the plan with the least disruption of the lower quad and greenways. The opposite side of the lower quad as a location would have affected significant trees and the historic cabin which we had just done roof renovations on to preserve it. Our plans call for many new trees to be planted on the lower quad and the Lunsford Commons at the end of construction and I hope that our students will embrace and love the new trees and maybe help us care for the trees as they get established."

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Chastity Striegel is a Mars Hill University junior who majors in biology.

Striegel said her initial reaction to the news was one of anger, but she said she understands some things are out of people's control.

"I live here most of the year, and I walk by those trees every single day," Striegel said. "To know that they've been here for 120 years, which is longer than any of the staff or students, of course, it's very sad."

Striegel, an Asheville native, said she feels at home in the mountains, and the trees are a part of that mountain identity.

"I feel closer to the mountains here, and being in the mountains includes being within the trees," Striegel said. "New trees are not nearly as efficient at carbon uptake as these older, old-growth trees are. So, there's no replacing them, really."

In response to the emails from students and faculty, Floyd agreed to Boggess to allow for the group to have access to the Grandmother Oak, which is more than 120 years old, according to information received by Boggess, on March 24.

Kevin West, the university's head of security, and Hunter Barnette, the construction site project manager with Van Noy, accompanied the group to the Grandmother Oak, where attendees recited poems and offered reflections.

Boggess also distributed daffodils to the group in remembrance of former Mars Hill University history professor Evelyn Underwood.

Boggess told The Citizen Times she was very encouraged by the students' and the community's response, as she said she received 20 to 30 emails from residents.

"There was a lot of interest and concern from the community, and people contacted me because I'm the environmental studies person here," Boggess said. "And I really think that it made a huge difference that the students wrote really respectfully, and from the heart. They were like, 'We love the trees. This was a big reason we came to this campus. We feel like they're a part of our community. If you can do anything to save them, please do.'"

According to Boggess, the students' response may have saved two of the trees scheduled for removal.

"They sent those emails over the course of a couple days, and then late (March 22), Tony called Michelle Gilly (the natural, mathematical and health science dean) and said that two of the trees would be saved," Boggess said.

Boggess said she submitted to the administration roughly 10 suggestions March 20 on how to best proceed with the construction.

"He genuinely wants the institution to succeed, and he's doing what he thinks is best," Boggess said. "I was impressed by how willing he was when we came with some suggestions. He really did his best to support those."

According to Floyd, the Grandmother Oak had also been a concern, as there were questions about it potentially having structural issues.

"Over the last few years, we have had incidents of large limbs coming down and times where Blackwell Hall and the Blackwell Hall parking was impacted with large debris," Floyd said. "Those are normal occurrences with large older trees and we experience that on a campus that has a lot of trees."

Incorporating the trees into design

Floyd said the administration's plans originally called for saving pieces of the trees and the Robinson Infirmary Building to be incorporated into the new construction or for later use.

According to the president, the administration requested the contractors take a cross-section from the larger trees to be incorporated in some way in the new campus center.

"We have a history, an example of which is in the president's conference room, of making some beautiful pieces from trees which have been lost over the years," Floyd said. "I hope we can save some of the cross sections as planned, and I know that some of our instructors would like a cut as well, to study in their classrooms."

As for the Robinson Infirmary Building, Floyd said the administration will only be able to save some of the rock, as other portions of the building have been damaged.

"As the building removal is underway, we will be able to ascertain how much of the rock will be salvageable," Floyd said. "We would like to have options in future years to use the stone in various projects. Some of our stone walls on campus need love and attention. There will be creative ways to pay tribute to the past with these stones. We will work in the future to find a way to clean mortar from the stones and repurpose them."

While the trees may be coming down, Boggess said she was energized by the concerted effort of the current students to speak their hearts and advocate for the trees.

"It feels important to me. We kind of lost our ceremonies that we had to honor the natural world," Boggess said. "This occasion, the threat of loss, is enough to bring people to remember that. It feels important to me, and that's why this was so important to me to do today. So, that's a silver lining."

